

Narrator:

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Pianist Soheil Nasserri has found a new audience in his homeland of Iran. A homeland that he'd never visited.

The 31-year-old musician has built a career in the concert halls of the United States, where he was born, and in Europe, where he lives for much of the year. His parents were born in Iran. And earlier this year, he traveled to Iran to visit and perform.

Nasserri:

There are a lot of people in Iran that are interested in western classical music. They have a symphony orchestra there that plays very, very well; they have a conductor there that used to be a conductor in Switzerland for many years before he came back to Iran. So I was surprised to the extent how many people were in fact interested in classical music, western classical music, and very impressed with — clearly many people who didn't know much about classical music but that were willing to listen to me play very patiently and attentively and responded very enthusiastically.

Narrator:

Nasserri played three recitals, one in Kerman and two in Tehran. He received an enthusiastic reception from the large crowds. He plans to return for more extensive concert tours and to spend more time with his extended family. But the trip was about more than family and music.

Nasserri:

It was a tremendous journey of self-discovery for me because I got to see who I am in a way which I had not understood before. I had seen elements of myself, but they'd never been made so clear as when I was in Iran. I had my first conversation with my grandmother because I'm learning Farsi. She only speaks Farsi. I only started to learn really when I went there. People ask me, "Did you have a good time?" or "How did you like it?" To me it's such a frivolous question to ask. I was so busy looking at myself in the mirror in a way that would not have been possible outside of Iran.

Narrator:

Nasserri had an early start in music. His parents met as classical music lovers in Iran, and he remembers being captivated by the piano at age 3. He started lessons at 5 and decided on a career soon after.

Nasserri:

Since I was 7, I remember wanting to be a concert pianist. That was my childhood "what are you going to be when you grow up." My parents are classical music lovers. I remember in my daycare center this other boy would go over to this tiny upright piano that was in the corner against the wall and he was picking out the theme from the Ninth Symphony of

Beethoven — I recognized it and it captivated me, and I wanted to learn how to play the piano, too. That was it.

Narrator:

Nasseri jumped into piano full time at the age 16 and started teaching himself instead of sticking with one teacher. He dropped out of secondary school over his parents' objections to pursue the piano.

Nasseri:

They were generally extremely supportive. There was a time when it wasn't; they weren't so supportive, which was when I decided to leave high school prior to my senior year in order to concentrate exclusively on the piano. The 11th grade was sort of a slide for me into this state of being unable to accomplish anything. Was I going to concentrate on the piano? There was a lot of work that needed to be done, it was really clear. To be honest with you, I didn't have any self-discipline at the time. I had to build that up in the years that followed. I developed this starting around the age of 15, and when I left school, by then it was a realization — ok, I'm undisciplined, I haven't done the work that I should do. If I want to be a pianist, I'm going to have to get my act together. Since I had no experience with self-discipline, I went overboard. I started practicing 20 hours a day, and I would sleep 10 hours and then wake up and practice another 20. I was trying to make up for lost time. This is also another example of how I'm self-taught. I didn't have people there advising me how exactly this all should have been done. It was me experimenting. I picked the 10 most difficult pieces I had ever heard of and piled them up next to the piano and started to learn them all at once. It was just something someone very inexperienced would do who had no good mentors guiding them.

Narrator:

Nasseri has achieved success despite the lack of a major promoter or recording label. He said that independence has given him the freedom to choose his programs from the broad range of classical composers.

Nasseri:

Bach is probably my favorite composer. It's just very, very difficult to perform and make an impression with. It's not something you want to win people over with. Bach is like prayer. It's a personal thing. To me, it doesn't matter if I play Bach in public or at home — it should be played the same way. With Bach, there's much more going on than meets the eye, or even the ear. It's really very, very spiritual. Whereas with Beethoven, all of my personality is called for by the music to be on display, which works very well for me and Beethoven because in my opinion we have very similar personalities, particularly in his sense of humor. I get his jokes, and there are jokes all over the place.

Narrator:

Nasseri has performed at dozens of public high schools in poor neighborhoods in the United States. He encourages young people to take up music.

Nasseri:

Playing the music, you know, that could be anything. It's about charming the kids with my personality in front of a group of sometimes a thousand kids. And kids have a tendency to be impatient, and if you show weakness, they will laugh at you and I would like to avoid that. If you can command their attention, then you can do — you can do anything with them; bring them in any direction you want. They'll give you a fair shot. If you win them over, you win their respect, then the sky's the limit.

Narrator:

The New York Times and other publications have embraced Nasser's work, and his opportunities are expanding. He will perform an all-Chopin program with the American Ballet Theatre this spring at New York's Metropolitan Opera House, interacting with the dancers as well as playing the piano. Whatever his schedule, though, he says it won't keep him from returning to perform in Iran. As an encore for his Iranian performances, he played the anthem Ey Iran, knowing that his listeners would come to their feet and sing.

Nasser:

All concerts, the room was just filled. People were very enthusiastic, and I felt an energy. I'm the performer so I'm going to feel an energy. Many people while I was getting the piano prepared and stuff, a few people said "'We need to get this right — he came all the way from America," that kind of thing. It was definitely not average daily occurrence that an American is given a stage in Iran. I even spoke, I would say in Farsi "I'm Iranian, born in California."

Narrator:

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